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Drawing on Walls and other Alliances

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On the cover:

Lungs of the Planet, mosaic tile mural, Dinand Library Garden, College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts.



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DRAWING ON WALLS

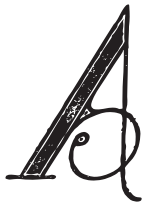
and Other Alliances

by Barbara Merolli
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The Solar System by Keiving Wong provides students with a spacious experience while studying and researching.

Photos by Barbara Merolli



At the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, the librarians strive to further the mission of the Jesuit liberal arts institution in its pursuit of excellence in teaching, learning, and research. When I first transitioned from the main library to the science library I was awed by the intensity of the science students frequenting the library, and realized that their workloads and the demands on their time hampered their ability to interact with the humanities. I also discovered a myth (which I still work to dispel) that many students believe: the science library can be used only by science majors. This led me to search for opportunities where the divide between the two domains could be bridged. Initially, I was thinking particularly along the lines of art in the library, but as this article shows, it expanded beyond artwork alone.

In this pursuit, I discovered that both science and humanities faculty shared my concerns and were eager to work with me on forming alliances with the libraries. These collaborations were innovative in that they brought together two worlds which don't always have opportunities to mix with each other, how they spawned other projects that drew non-traditional users into the science library, and, most significantly, they enabled the librarian to be embedded in academic courses.

A review of the literature reveals articles about artwork in libraries leading to embedded librarianship, but the topic is by no means saturated. A wide range of approaches has been used, but few focused on an interdisciplinary approach using artwork, exhibits, and their related receptions to embed the librarian into the classroom. Juanpere, Valera, and Viladomiu came close to doing this in their article about offering an interdisciplinary attitudes subject in the fine arts curriculum at the University of Barcelona, but the focus of this program was more on using library resources and materials to inspire and create artwork rather than highlighting art inspired by science-related disciplines.¹ Extra-curricular competitions to solicit artwork exhibits

in libraries were described for Fort Lewis College's Reed Library's annual student art competition by Astrid Oliver.² Another example is Jennifer Benedetto Beals's article describing the University of Tennessee libraries providing venues for student artwork.³ At Hong Kong Baptist University, Shun Han Rebekah Wong explained how the librarians created and led the Heritage Project which is curriculum related, but focuses on the showcasing of art online rather than in the physical library space.⁴ In some libraries, the artwork exhibitions focus on professional artists' rather than students' work, or have a mixture of both. This was the case at Dartmouth College, where professional artists have showcased their own work and collaborative work with students. Dartmouth also has several programs that highlight students' artwork, some of which is curriculum related, but Beahan, Graveline, and Taxman did not describe the librarians' involvement in any detail.⁵ Mullins and Watkins indicated that the Dana Library art program at Rutgers University's Newark Campus encompasses student, campus, and community collaboration, but did not identify the extent to which librarians are embedded in the classroom.⁶



Photos by Barbara Merolli

It all started in the spring of 2008

It was in the spring of 2008 that I first considered the opportunity to create an alliance with an art department professor. The College's project manager notified me that beginning in January 2009, the atrium glass wall comprising one entire side of the O'Callahan Science Library (above) would be completely boarded up with plywood during renovations. The library was to remain open, albeit in the middle of a construction zone, with essentially no natural light. The footprint of the science library is a rectangular box, with the main entrance centrally located midway along the atrium wall. The long wall opposite the atrium wall forms part of the building's foundation and is actually subterranean against the hillside. The only other source of natural light is a row of windows obscured by stacks of books on one of the shorter walls at the far end of the library.

Concerned that the library might feel like a mushroom farm during this project, I approached the visual arts department to determine opportunity and interest in collaborating on a student project to decorate the plywood barrier. I ultimately connected with professor Cristi Rinklin who was scheduled to teach a course titled *The Art of Color* in the fall of 2008. Rinklin realized that the design project would be a perfect fit for her students' final project—to create science-inspired, bright, colorful artwork on a large scale that at the same time would enable her students to study the principles and practices of color theory and its application.

Early in the fall 2008 semester, the eleven students

in Rinklin's class toured a biology lab, hosted by professors Rob Bellin and Mary Lee Ledbetter, where they viewed colorful specimens under confocal and scanning electron microscopes. The students next visited the science library where they obtained a sense of the space and size for their future artwork. They also browsed print journals for inspirational images. Each piece of artwork was initially painted on letter-sized paper and scanned into Photoshop where it was layered (adding attributes or special effects) and filtered to fit large spaces. The support specialist in visual arts printed the works onto adhesive backed vinyl wallpaper using an ink-jet printer. Each piece measured two feet wide by six feet long.

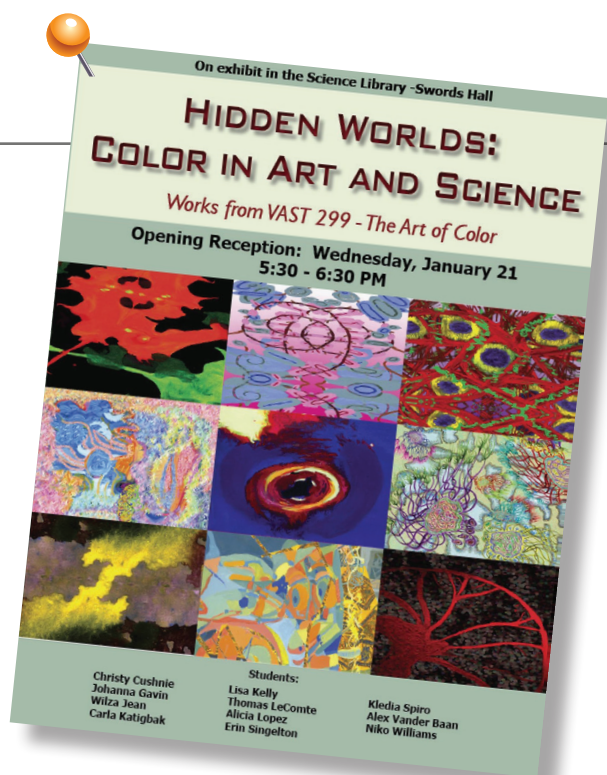
The colors were brilliant and the abstract shapes and patterns were mesmerizing. Johanna Gavin titled her work, *Colors across the Universe*. It is a rendering of a photograph taken by the Hubble Telescope of a dust disk around a star. Other students described their works as "representing modern medicine and contemporary art juxtaposed with traditional methods in medicine and art" and "...an image on the computer of a fruit fly magnified hundreds of times to the point where it was unrecognizable."

Professor Rinklin and Roger Hankins, Director of the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Art Gallery, installed the *Hidden Worlds: Color in Art and Science* exhibit over the winter break. When the students returned for spring semester in January 2009, the science library and art



Holy Cross professor Leila Philip and artist Garth Evans discuss their work and the exhibit, *Water Rising*.

Hidden Worlds reception poster (design by Cristi Rinklin).



department hosted a reception for the students and their friends and families, with students giving brief talks about their pieces. This exhibit brightened the science library throughout the calendar year 2009. It was sad to remove the pieces once the construction was completed, but Rinklin saved the digital files of each piece for future use. Inspired by this successful collaboration, I was keen to undertake another collaborative project highlighting students' work with a faculty member.

One thing leads to another

Hidden Worlds provided the inspiration for a project in which I collaborated with English Department associate professor Leila Philip in two sessions (2012 and 2013) of Philip's Writing Science course. I worked with the students throughout the semester by participating in classroom film viewings and discussions. For their final projects, the students planned and conducted a reception in the science library during which they each read excerpts from their essays.

Earlier alliances inspired a new project with the summer science and humanities research programs. Professor Daniel Bitran, coordinator of the sciences summer research program, and Professor Daniel Klinghard, coordinator of the humanities summer research program, thought that *Hidden Worlds* was an impressive collaboration between different entities. They were keen to implement a similar endeavor involving their respective programs. Very often, the two summer research programs ran alongside each other on campus for the nine-week research sessions, but with very little interaction between the students. Concerned by the negative effects of this silo environment, the coordinators approached me to develop a collaborative activity with them that would take place in the science library. We brainstormed about possible ways to facilitate interaction among all the research students and decided upon a town meeting format for discussions of topics that related to both science and humanities. The students participated in four town meetings (2012, 2013, and 2014) to share their thoughts from their respective disciplines on multi-sided issues including cybernetics, chicken farming, stem cell research, genetic engineering of "ethical" babies as a moral obligation, sexual orientation, and drones. Each town meeting was held in the early evening and included light refreshments and conversation. The discussions grew quite lively and lasted beyond the expected closing time.

The most recent collaboration was an event with Professor Leila Philip in spring 2016, lasting from January through the end of March. This exhibit had a unique twist in focus and scope. While on sabbatical, Philip partnered with her husband, internationally-known sculptor Garth Evans, to work in media different from that in which they usually worked. Philip worked in poetry (her usual media is literary nonfiction) and Evans worked in water color paintings. For inspiration, they chose the natural environment surrounding their home, including woodlands, ponds, beaver dams, and wildlife. When they viewed their work side by side, they realized the poems and watercolors were compatible

and complementary. They developed the project as a book, *Water Rising*, to generate conversations about and support for environmental stewardship. The proceeds from the sale of the book are being donated to nonprofit environmental organizations working to preserve the beauty and natural resources of New England, especially in northeastern Connecticut, where they live and worked on this project. In collaboration with the college's environmental studies program director and associate professor, Sarah Mitchell, they installed an exhibit of their work in the science library and held a reception and artists' talk. The exhibit consisted of reproductions of selected watercolor paintings, related poems, and photographs of scenes that inspired them. In their talk, they emphasized how intriguing it was that the watercolors spoke to the text of the poems and the poems informed ways of looking at the images. Students from Philip's creative writing class participated in the discussion with the artists.⁷



Above: poster for *Water Rising* exhibit.

Drawing on Walls artwork: (right) *Urgent Threat: Antibiotic Resistance* by Erin Quinlevan, (far right): *Salticidae* (Jumping Spider) by Aiden Duffy.

Drawing on Walls

Drawing on Walls was a collaborative project with visual arts visiting lecturer Marguerite White during the spring 2015 semester. In December 2014, White contacted me regarding the possibility that the students in her upcoming spring class, *Drawing on Walls*, could create their final project on the stark white walls of the science library.

The students and professor met in the science library during their regular class meeting time on several occasions. They first met to survey the space and scope out walls that would be suitable for their pieces of artwork. Students marked off the walls of their choice with painter's tape for White's approval. For those students who required a dark background, White painted the chosen areas with blackboard paint. Students used a pastel art medium to create their artwork while drop cloths were used to protect the carpeting. Normally, the artwork created for this course is displayed for a few weeks, evaluated by the professor, and then covered or removed, returning the walls to their original state. For this project, I requested that the artwork remain on the walls for an indefinite period of time. Once the artwork was completed, White applied a fixative to prevent it from being damaged inadvertently.

The students' inspiration or motivation for selecting particular themes is interesting to consider. I had suggested they consider using a science-related theme to which they enthusiastically agreed. Their professor required them to submit their ideas to her for approval before beginning the actual work. *The Drawing on Walls* artwork themes included spiders, fish, jellyfish, an octopus, the solar system, a galaxy, sea organisms, wave physics, DNA, *E. coli*, a gorilla fingerspelling with sign language, and molecule structures for a variety of substances (penicillin, LSD, morphine, cholesterol, caffeine, Valium and tetracycline) overwritten by Japanese characters that spell out "I don't understand" and "it is not easy to learn a foreign language." Interpretive labels with the students' own description accompanied each work.

Deinopidae, *Salticidae*, *Argiope aurantia* by Aiden Duffy is an attempt to alter the commonly held opinion of spiders being ugly, terrifying, and dangerous. *Bright Fish/White Fish/Pink Fish/Light Fish* by Clare McLaughlin depicts species of fish (Atlantic salmon, Atlantic cod, and bluefin tuna) that are at risk of extinction or endangered due to overfishing. *Urgent*



Photos by: (left) College of the Holy Cross/Tom Rettig, (right) Barbara Merrell



Threat: Antibiotic Resistance by Erin Quinlevan portrays the evolution of bacteria.

Galaxy, Black and White by Victoria Piscatelli plays with the idea of creating and expanding space within a restricted physical environment. Piscatelli chose a wall that can be viewed from the atrium to emphasize the juxtaposition of open and restricted spaces. *Antarctica's Deep Water* by Mary Welsh was inspired by the book, *The Last Ocean: Antarctica's Ross Sea Project: Saving the Most Pristine Ecosystem on Earth*, by John Weller. Welsh was especially intrigued by the organisms *Monocaulus parvula* and *Mertensiid ctenophores*.

The Solar System by Keiving Wong provides students with a spacious experience while studying and researching. *Signs* by Rebecca Blackwell sparked an informative conversation when members of the American Sign Language & Deaf Studies program viewed it, as it emphasizes fingerspelling over conceptual signing. *Octo-Jelly* by Aury Abhar wraps around all four sides of a concrete pillar. It is visible from my office; I can gaze at it every time I look up from my desk.

Results

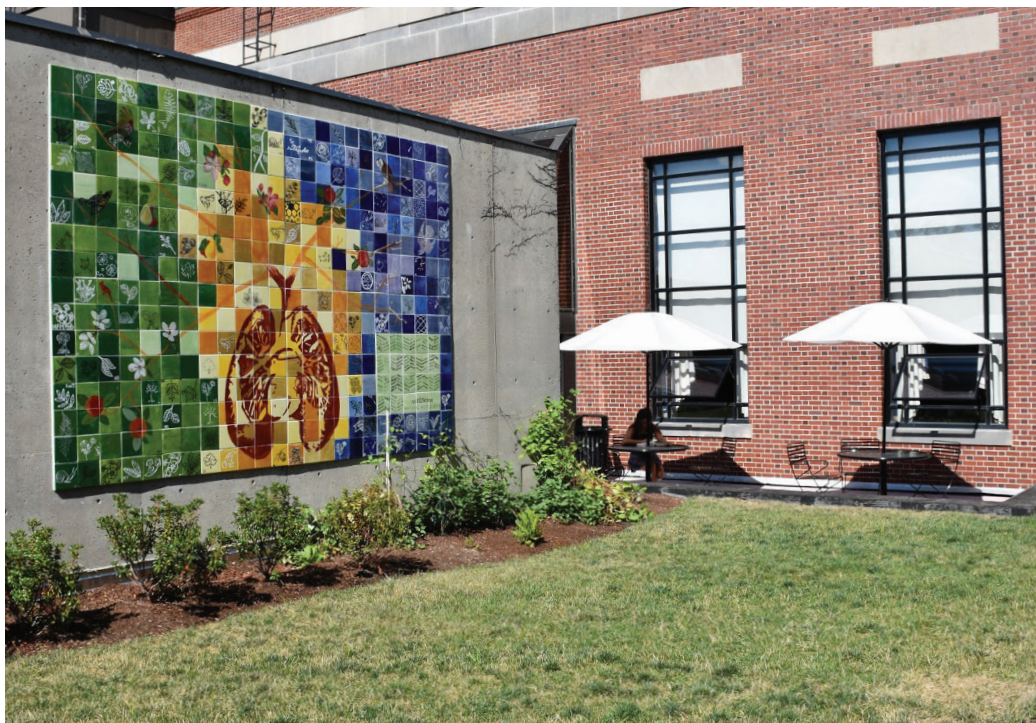
The *Drawing on Walls* exhibit generated impressive interest. It not only drew in friends and family members of the artists, but also groups of faculty, alumni, potential donors to the college, staff, visitors from other institutions touring the college campus, and even diners having lunch at the science café, from which several of the pieces are visible through the atrium windows. Many of them become regulars; one *Drawing on Walls* student-artist liked the science library so much, she applied for a job. Having a chance to observe how conscientiously she worked on her project, I promptly hired her. In 2015, I presented a *Drawing on Walls* talk at the Dartmouth College Library's October conference for New England academic librarians who responded with much excitement and energy. This exhibit will remain on display in the science library indefinitely.

Consistent increases in visits to the library support the value of these exhibits and receptions. The average gate count increase is 8.5 percent for the same week year-over-year from 2010 through 2015. The gate count increase for the first four weeks of the 2015-2016 academic year was 21 percent over the previous year.

Future endeavors

As happened previously, one of these projects tends to lead to another. In a collaboration of the library staff, visual arts department, Worcester Center for Crafts, the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Art Gallery, and the Natural World Cluster of the Montserrat (first-year) program, students created a tile mosaic mural titled *Lungs of the Planet*. The mural was installed in the newly refurbished rooftop garden of the west wing of Dinand Library, the main library. In the mural, the trachea of the lungs transform into tree branches from which hang images of flowers and birds. The background tiles depict images of flowers, leaves, fruit, insects, chemical symbols, astronomical entities, and other natural world images, all of which symbolize the cycle of life. Along with the eight-foot-by-twelve-foot mosaic panel decorating one of two concrete walls, there are tables, chairs, and benches dispersed among the trees and plants. A photo exhibit depicting the process of creating and installing the mural is scheduled to be installed in the science library in the summer of 2016 and will be on exhibit through the first half of the fall semester. The goal of the photo exhibit is to encourage people to visit the main library and use the garden space for studying, group work, or contemplation. The garden is open to the public during regular daytime library hours, weather permitting.⁸

Exploratory plans are underway to host an exhibit based on a book, *From Music to Mathematics: Exploring the Connections*, by professor Gareth Roberts of the mathematics and computer science department. This exhibit is tentatively scheduled for academic year 2017-2018. It may evolve into a collaboration of the mathematics and music departments, and the science and music libraries, with a musical component, a talk by Roberts, and an exhibit in the science library. Students from Roberts's mathematics class and possibly students from a music class will participate in the discussion. Tentative plans are in place to collaborate on an exhibit, talk, and reception with the environmental studies program to highlight the work of a visiting professor in the fall of 2016.



Lessons learned

When implementing collaborative projects, several guidelines are useful to keep in mind. Although the projects are different in many aspects, the following applies to most if not all of them. The first lesson is to start early; a plan should be in place before the course or program begins to provide sufficient time to include the assignment in the course syllabus, or to publicize, plan, and promote a project. When working with a course-related project involving students, the fall semester is generally better than the spring. Because these projects happen at the very end of the semester, close to or during exam time, the opportunity for promotion and celebration is limited. It is easier to maintain focus and momentum over the shorter winter break and hold receptions, talks, and celebrations at the beginning of the spring semester. If the same strategy were adopted for a spring semester course, momentum might be lost over the summer and some participating students may no longer be on campus, owing to graduation or study abroad.

There is a clear need for strong support and coordination between the faculty member and librarian. Both need to meet together with the students to ensure that the students understand their assignment, understand the space considerations in the library, and understand appropriate behavior while working on their installations in the library. Considerations include safety (ladders), traffic (blocking passage ways),

Photo by Barbara Merolli

noise (conversations), odors (paint and fixative), and availability (library space as well as faculty, librarian, and student schedules).

Further, it is helpful for the librarian to have the opportunity to get to know the students before they commence with their projects. This helps both students and library staff to develop a rapport and a respect for each other's needs. By nature of timing, the students with exhibit projects are in the library at a time when all students are under pressure, anxieties are high, and the library is in great demand for its traditional purposes of providing research and study space. If the installation is not handled carefully, the students who use the library frequently might feel imposed upon by these students coming in to work on projects that are inevitably disruptive. Likewise, the artists must focus on their work, and shouldn't feel as if they have to tip-toe around others in the library. One of the reasons for doing these projects is to draw new clientele into the library; if they feel uncomfortable working on their projects there, they won't come back and may discourage others from visiting or using our library. One solution is to open the library to the project installations during a time when it is normally closed, or encourage students to work on their projects when the library is least busy.

The final lesson for librarians is to get out of the library on an ongoing basis. When librarians attend other events on campus (e.g., concerts, talks, exhibits, symposia, academic conferences, etc.), faculty members realize librarians are interested in what they and their students are doing, and it makes the librarians more approachable for collaborations. As library liaison to one of six clusters in Montserrat, the college's first-year program, I attend as many co-curricular activities of the cluster as possible, either cluster-wide or within individual seminars. Participating in these activities enables me to interact with the students and get to know them early on in their college careers. It also enables me to interact with faculty from departments outside the sciences with whom I would not otherwise be likely to work or get to know.

Conclusion

Many libraries showcase artwork on and within their walls. Quite often that artwork is created by professional or semi-professional artists drawn from faculty and staff, or from outside the college community. With the goal of showcasing the library, I focus on highlighting works created by students and engaging them for the pleasure and enlightenment of other students. I also strive to be as embedded in the academic aspect of the projects as possible, rather than just providing a venue and curatorial services. As a result of these alliances, not only does the science library benefit from having beautiful artwork and intriguing exhibits, but the students benefit as well. They have the opportunity to critically discuss their work and receive feedback. They also have the benefit of discovering a library and library services that they otherwise might never explore. Because the students are moving targets in the sense that they progress relatively quickly through their classes and their time on campus, time is always of the essence, but it is worth it in the end to expend the extra effort to showcase students' skills, knowledge, and gifts. ■

Barbara Merolli has been the science librarian in the O'Callahan Science Library for eight years. Being a librarian is a second career for her, having worked for many years as a manager in a large corporation. Merolli relates that she developed an interest in the sciences as a result of witnessing many exceptionally dedicated and knowledgeable medical personnel provide care for several family members. This led her to pursue a degree in the library profession and become the science librarian at College of the Holy Cross.

Endnotes

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